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*The Licanius Trilogy*

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AN  
ECHO OF  
THINGS  
TO COME

The Licanius Trilogy: Book Two

JAMES ISLINGTON



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## Prologue

*The morning air was still as Caeden brushed his thumb against the axe's edge, nodding as a fine line of crimson blushed where the skin made contact.*

*He stared at the gently welling blood for a few moments, its momentary sting nothing against the sudden onslaught of memory the sight provided. Time—almost a year, now—hadn't dulled the edge of his guilt, hadn't helped his horror to fade.*

*Nor had it eased the inescapable ache of his loss. To Caeden's shame, that still hurt more than everything else combined.*

*Would this work? Surely it had to. He felt absently at his neck, probing at the welts from where the rope had twisted and scraped, tightened. He remembered the snap as he'd jerked to a stop.*

*And he remembered the tears as he'd woken, just dangling there, unable to breathe but his body refusing to fail regardless. Remembered his disbelief when his hands and legs had been able to move, as if nothing had happened.*

*He'd hung there for hours in a stupor, waiting for an end that refused to come.*

*Caeden inhaled sharply and steeled himself against the memory, handing the axe to the grizzled captain standing opposite. It was taken hesitantly, the burly man's uncertainty unmistakable.*

*"Are you sure about this, Lord Deshrel?" he asked quietly.*

*Caeden nodded once, then knelt. Placed his head carefully on the block.*

*"A clean cut, Sadien. All the way through. If it is not..." He*

*swallowed, then twisted slightly to look up. "A clean cut," he repeated, his tone firm.*

*Sadien hefted the weapon, expression bleak, then gave a single nod.*

*Caeden turned back toward the ground. He closed his eyes.*

*"I am sorry, Ell," he said softly as the blade fell.*

Caeden gave a choking gasp as he came awake.

His hands flew to his neck, searching for the wound he knew had to be there. They came away clean of blood; even so it took several seconds to orient himself, to separate what he had seen from where he was.

Slowly the pounding of his heart began to ease and he lay sprawled on his back for a while, just breathing, staring vacantly at the black stone ceiling. Gently pulsing veins of Essence—Caeden thought that it was Essence, anyway—ran haphazardly across its surface, standing out jaggedly against the dark, smooth stone. Colors trickled through those veins in a constant, rhythmic, hypnotic waterfall of motion. Green here, a deep blue there. A soft yellow, then an unsettling red. The hues fluctuated and coalesced through the thin spiderweb of lines, not overpowering the clean light of the Essence lamp by Caeden's bed, but bright enough to consistently draw his eye.

He was still here—still in the same plainly furnished, perfectly circular chamber. Still deep underground, right where the Portal Box had sent him after the battle in Ilin Illan.

"You remembered something."

Caeden flinched, then rolled and scrambled weakly to his feet, stumbling a couple of steps away from the balding, white-bearded man standing in the doorway.

"Leave me alone." His voice was hoarse, little more than a whisper.

Asar stooped, carefully placing a plate of food and a cup on the ground between them. The motion was familiar now, well practiced. He straightened again, for a moment looking as though he was about to leave.

Then he touched the sword at his side, a gesture more than a warning.

"A year and a day, Tal'kamar," Asar said softly, the gently shifting lights from the wall reflected in his eyes. "And now you have two weeks less than that—two weeks less to stop the end of all we know. Two weeks in which you've barely eaten, barely drank anything. Barely slept, as far as I've been able to tell." The older man stared at Caeden for another long moment, then shook his head, looking bewildered. "Why do you still fight it? I knew it would come as a shock, but this... have you truly changed so much?"

"Yes." Caeden snarled the word, but he could hear the desperation in it. "I am not... *him*."

"How can you tell?" asked Asar quietly. "You do not even know who he is."

"I know enough."

"I doubt that. You know a couple of stories, a few grains of sand in the hourglass of your life. And out of context, at that." Asar's eyes showed his concern. "I cannot force this on you, Tal'kamar—for it to work, you must be willing. But you know I speak the truth. You still have the Portal Box, so you could have run. You could be a world away by now. Yet here we stand."

Caeden grimaced but didn't argue. The bronze cube with the mysterious markings—the Vessel that had brought Caeden here in the first place—*was* still in his pocket. He closed his eyes for a long moment, trying to shut out the anger, the fear, the despair. Every emotion told him to run, to ignore anything that might touch on what he'd seen. What he'd *done*.

But he knew, deep down, that it wouldn't change anything. He couldn't avoid his past forever. And the longer he waited, the harder facing it would be.

He wanted nothing more than to tell Asar to leave, as he had every other time the man had come.

But he didn't.

Slowly, he shuffled forward. Picked up the cup on the ground and took a few sips, letting the cool liquid slide down his raw throat.

"I remember dying," he said quietly. He gave an involuntary

shiver. "I remember the blade falling on my neck, and..." He trailed off.

Asar's expression didn't change, but what Caeden thought was pity glinted in his eyes. "That must be disorienting."

Caeden gave a humorless laugh, rubbing again at his neck. "Yes."

He hesitated. Part of him wanted to ask—ask how he could still be here, how he could remember something like that.

But the other part still didn't want to know.

Asar continued to study him, then took a seat opposite with a sigh. "Tal'kamar, we do not have time to just—"

"I didn't believe it at first." Caeden forced himself to maintain eye contact with Asar, but he couldn't keep the pain from his tone. "When you showed me...*that*... I thought you were trying to fool me, for some end that I didn't understand. I did consider running, using the Portal Box again. I considered finding you and trying to force a confession from you, too."

Asar watched him impassively, silent.

Caeden took a deep breath, but his voice still trembled as he spoke. "I knew that the memory was mine, though. I *knew*. Just like I know that I remember dying. I didn't dream that I died. I *remember dying*." He dropped his gaze, hands shaking as the torrent of emotions he had fought constantly over the past two weeks threatened to overcome him again. Shame. Fear. Horror. Rage. Crushing, soul-searing guilt. And threaded through it all, that ever-present, impossibly heavy cord of despair. "So you're right. I know the truth."

"And yet?" asked Asar softly.

Caeden gave another rasping laugh, spreading his hands. He was beyond lying, beyond subtlety. Honesty was all he could manage. "And yet I still fear it. I fear what knowing the rest will do to me. How it will change me." He raised his eyes so that they met Asar's again. "A friend of mine once told me that when I got my memories back, I would have a choice. That no matter what I'd done, who I'd been...*that* I had a decision to make, moving forward. That the man I have been since I woke up in the forest, the one I *want* to be, doesn't have to be erased by what I remember. *Shouldn't* be erased." He kept his gaze locked on Asar's,

but he could still feel his hands quivering as unwanted echoes of memory crashed around in his head. "But I killed people. Murdered them. Fates, I was *Aarkein Devaed*."

Asar watched him for a long moment.

Then he nodded slowly.

"You did. You were. You want reassurance, but..." He gave the slightest of apologetic shrugs. "In some ways we *are* slaves to our memories. What you remember will change you. The knowledge you gain will change you. Understanding what is at stake *will* change you, change how easy it is for you to be the man you aspire to be. It will be easier to make choices you might believe unthinkable now. It will be harder to choose what is right over what is expedient, when you know how many times that has resulted in failure, and how important it is to succeed." He leaned forward, expression serious. "But all of us who live long enough face that problem, Tal'kamar. Sometimes it's what's right against what lets us win. Sometimes it's what's right against what lets us survive. But it is always a choice."

Caeden swallowed, clenched his fists. Nodded. The next line of inquiry was the hardest, the one that had been burning within him since the moment Asar had shown him who he was.

"I remember... I remember *renouncing* the name Aarkein Devaed," he said quietly, heart pounding. "I was glad that I would not remember the things I'd done as him." It was the only reason he was still here.

Asar leaned back, nodding slowly in response to the unasked question.

"Yes, Tal'kamar. You did. You rejected the name. You took the narrow road. You switched sides," he said gently, a surprising note of pride in his tone. "If it helps, you had stopped being Aarkein Devaed long before you lost your memory. We have been trying to stop what he started for a long time now. We are fighting everything that he once stood for."

Caeden breathed out, entire body going limp. He took a few seconds and allowed himself a long draught of water this time, a wave of emotion rolling over him.

Then he looked up at Asar, resolve beginning to return alongside the relief.

“And my memories,” he said softly. “They’ll help us stop the invasion?”

Asar was silent for a few seconds, and Caeden saw the answer in his hesitation.

“This is about so much more than that,” the older man said eventually. “You are right to want to save the country, Tal’kamar, but this is about saving the world. We are at the brink of resolving a conflict that has raged for lifetimes, and sometimes we need to choose the greater good. We need to—”

“We need to do both. I haven’t come here just so that I can leave my friends to their fate.” Caeden cocked his head to the side, a flash of memory triggering. “The lesser of two evils, and the greater good. The most dangerous phrases in the world.”

Asar studied Caeden, looking more taken aback than irritated.

“Even so, sometimes sacrifice cannot be avoided. If you would just let me restore your memories—all of your memories—then you would understand.” Despite the words, Asar’s tone held a note of uncertainty now.

Caeden leaned forward. “You said I wanted to change,” he said softly. “Perhaps this is one of the reasons why.”

Asar grunted. “Perhaps,” he conceded, not looking pleased at the thought. He shook his head. “But that is a conversation for another time. For now, we at least need to restore the memories you wanted. You need to understand what we’re trying to do, and why.” He gestured. “Follow me.”

Caeden hesitated, then reluctantly trailed after Asar, stumbling a little as he vainly tried to stretch muscles that were stiff from disuse.

The tunnel outside his room was lined with more of the strange, variegated veins of light pulsing in between its smooth black surfaces. It seemed to be the same everywhere on this lower level, but Caeden couldn’t even begin to hazard what might be causing the strange phenomenon.

“What is this place?” he asked eventually, his voice echoing hollowly down the passageway.

“I told you when you arrived. The Wells of Mor Aruil.” Asar said nothing for a moment, then glanced across and shook his head as if suddenly realizing that the name would mean nothing

to Caeden. “Mor Aruil was once a Darecian outpost, a tiny island not far from the edge of the Shattered Lands. We didn’t know for a very long time, but the Darecians were here because they had discovered a massive source of Essence. These tunnels were once all conduits, part of the system they used to draw that Essence to the surface.” He snorted softly at Caeden’s look. “No need to be concerned—the Wells went dry millennia ago. The Darecians used some of these tunnels as storage for a while after that, but the island never had much value from a tactical perspective. They eventually closed it all off. Abandoned it. Every tunnel connected to where we are is shielded, protected, impossible to break into. The only way in or out is by opening a Gate.”

Caeden skipped a couple of steps to keep up with Asar. “A Gate?” The other man had said the word as if it were significant.

“A portal. A less... *fiery* version of what that bronze box of yours does,” Asar elaborated wryly. “Very few people know how to make Gates, so even if the others somehow know where we are, none of them can get in here.” He shrugged. “And even if they could—I am by far the strongest of the remaining Venerate. It would take all of them combined to beat me, here. We are safe enough.” There was no boasting in Asar’s voice, just a quiet, reassuring confidence that what he said was true. Caeden felt the tension in his shoulders relax ever so slightly at the words.

They reached the end of the tunnel, and Caeden blinked as they emerged into a large room. Like the upper level of Mor Aruil—the one on which the Portal Box had first deposited him two weeks ago—no shifting colors trickled through the walls here. Light was provided by smokeless yellow torches that burned low but steady, illuminating walls lined with bookshelves, each one filled to overflowing with tomes and loose paper. In the corner, a single bed was neatly made.

Asar gestured Caeden to a seat; after a moment Caeden slowly took it. “You live here?”

“I do.”

Something in Asar’s voice made Caeden pause. He glanced around again at the small bed, the shelves of books. “You said no one could get in *or out* if they could not create a Gate...” He gave Asar a querying look.

Asar inclined his head. "We all make sacrifices," he said quietly. Caeden swallowed at that, nodding. There was silence as they settled into their seats, and then Asar leaned forward.

"This process—restoring your memory—it is...going to be difficult. Exhausting, even." Asar grimaced. "We couldn't just repress your memories, Tal'kamar. If the Lyth had been able to access them, they would not have accepted Andrael's deal as fulfilled. So you had to go through Eryth Mmorg—what the others call the Waters of Renewal." He gestured, expression twisted in distaste. "All but the faintest vestiges of your memories were wiped clean when you did that."

Caeden frowned. "I thought you said they were just hidden?"

"They are. Not inside your head, though." Asar held his gaze. "You are an Augur, Tal'kamar. You can go back to those moments in time, re-experience the things you've lived through. What I showed you, the day you arrived—I didn't know what you would see, not for sure. I just sent you back there."

Caeden shuddered at the reminder, but eventually forced a nod.

Asar watched him for a moment, then sighed. "Using kan to peer through time—even into the past—will be tiring. I'll guide you as best I can, and it will get easier as we go, but you're going to need to sleep in between the memories at first. A lot, probably."

Caeden hesitated. "Wouldn't it be easier to just...explain what's going on?"

Asar gestured, a hint of impatience to the motion. "I will explain some, certainly. I will answer the questions you know to ask. But some of it is too complex, some would simply take too long, and some..." He sighed. "Some you will not like. To understand—*truly* understand—what is going on, you need the context that only your memories can provide. And I will *not* waste time debating the right course of action with you as a parent would a precocious child."

Caeden scowled, shuffling a little in his seat. "Very well. If I'm not the enemy that half of Andarra seems to think, then let's start with who we're really fighting." He leaned forward. "At least explain what is waiting for us beyond the Boundary, should it fall."

Asar hesitated, clearly reluctant.

"Shammaeloth, Tal'kamar. Shammaeloth is who is waiting beyond the Boundary," he said eventually.

Caeden stared at him blankly. "*Shammaeloth*. From the Old Religion."

"Perhaps." Asar stared intently at Caeden, as if willing him to understand. "It is what we call him, at least. It is a name appropriate to his nature." He gave a small shrug. "But it would also not surprise me if he was Shammaeloth in fact. He is very, very good at using truth to lend strength to his lies, and he has used the core of that religion to lie to us from the beginning."

Caeden just stared for a moment, trying to come to grips with what the other Augur was suggesting, unable to keep the incredulous look from his face.

"What is he, then? A man? A creature? Something else?" He gave a nervous laugh. "So what actually happens when the source of all evil gets free?"

Asar sighed at the cynicism in Caeden's tone, not saying anything. Eventually, he just shook his head.

"It is a lot to take in. And I understand your doubt, Tal'kamar. Truly I do," he said softly, "but we do not have time for it. Perhaps it is better if I show you."

He leaned forward abruptly. Before Caeden could react, his fingers were touching Caeden's forehead.

*Caeden screamed, but here he had no voice. Shrieking pain raked at him, but though he tried to twist away from it, he had no body. He tried to focus but there was no clarity here, just a constantly rupturing schism of consciousness. Every fiber of his being scrabbled desperately to get away from the raw, cold torment. He could not.*

*He thrashed in convulsive agony for longer than he could bear, and then more. Days? Years? There was a screeching cacophony until it could be borne no longer; there was an empty, swirling silence that left a desolate panic bubbling uncontrollably inside of him. There was searing pain and icy wretchedness. There was misery and anguish and bottomless loss.*

*There was no relief.*

Caeden woke to the sound of screams.

It took him a moment to realize that they were his own. Tears streamed down his face; his throat was on fire and every muscle was taut as he lay curled into a tight ball, shivering uncontrollably.

Time passed; eventually he took some deep, shuddering breaths and forced his body to unwind. Still trembling, he rolled onto his side, looking up at Asar.

“What . . . what was that?” he gasped.

“The Darklands,” said Asar quietly, leaning down and offering his hand. “It is where we think our enemy is from. His realm. And it is what this world may become if he succeeds.”

Caeden hesitated, then grasped Asar’s hand, letting the white-bearded man haul him back into his chair. “There was . . .” He trailed off, shuddering. His mind shied away from the memory. “I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Nobody does,” said Asar gently. “The best I have heard it explained is that it is an absence. It is what it would be if there was no joy, no life, no light, no hope. If everything—*everything*—that made this world a comfort to us was stripped away, completely and utterly.” Asar gazed at Caeden sympathetically.

Caeden just groaned. “How long was I there?”

“You were not *there*, Tal’kamar. I do not believe that is something which even we could endure. What you saw was a memory from a man named Alchesh. One that came at the cost of his sanity.” Asar paused. “And it was only a moment. What I just showed you was a fraction of a second in that place, no more.”

Caeden shivered, instinctively sinking back against the fabric of his seat.

“That is what we fight, Tal’kamar,” continued Asar quietly. “That is what is coming if the Boundary should fall. We believe that Shammaeloth’s goal is Deilannis—to reach the rift there and to tear it wide, so that he can escape this world. Escape time itself. And in doing so, allow the Darklands to consume what he leaves behind.” He leaned forward. “So now you see. *That* is why we do not have time to deal again with the doubt and unbelief that you

have already been through once. *That* is why it is so imperative that we restore your memories.”

Caeden closed his eyes, still trying to steady himself.

“Why would I ever have fought for him, then?” he asked softly.

“Why would *anyone* . . .”

“Because he fooled us.” Asar’s words were firm but gentle. “For a long time, we thought that we were doing the right thing.”

“The right thing?” repeated Caeden, a hint of scorn returning some of the strength to his voice. “How could he possibly fool someone into believing that?”

“It’s *what he does*.” Asar’s voice had turned sharp, and Caeden could see that he’d touched on a wound still not healed. “Do not assume that his intent was obvious, nor that we were simply stupid or naive. He gave us not only a compelling falsehood, but a compelling morality to go with it—something to live for and something to live by. Do not forget that he is older than even we can imagine. He spent *hundreds of years* proving himself, building trust, laying the foundation of his story and giving us a sense of purpose. He knows each of our weaknesses, and he exploits them in unimaginably subtle ways. He is more intelligent, more convincing, more clever, and more *patient* than any of us could ever hope to be. So much so that most of the others are not just still fighting for him—they *believe* in him, heart and soul.”

Caeden subsided, shifting uncomfortably, not sure how to respond.

Eventually, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said reluctantly. It was a hard thing to comprehend, let alone accept—but at least for now, he didn’t seem to have a choice. He straightened, his heart rate finally slowing again after what Asar had shown him. “Who are these others you keep mentioning?”

Asar sighed again, impatience creeping into his tone this time. “There were eleven of us, originally. The Darecians called us the Venerate; in their language, it was a way of mocking us—both for the blind worship we received, and the blind worship we gave. But it stuck.” He took a deep breath. “You and me. Gassandrid. Alaris. Cyr. Isiliar. Andrael. Diara. Meldier. Wereth. Tysis. Three

and a half thousand years ago, Shammaeloth brought us all together. We were immortal before we ever met him, but Shammaeloth is the one who first showed us how to use kan.”

Caeden opened his mouth, then shut it again. “So...these others are our enemies now, too?” he asked, thinking immediately of his previous encounter with Alaris.

Asar groaned, the sound one of pure frustration. “Shammaeloth’s true nature started to show through. Some of us saw it, some of us didn’t. Inevitably, we broke apart.” He shrugged tiredly. “Look—we could keep going like this for days. I could spend precious hours explaining our past, recounting events you’ve already experienced, trying to train you again—and in the end, that is exactly how much wiser you would be. Hours, not the centuries you need to be.” He rubbed his forehead. “Time is against us, and this will be a difficult process. Laborious. Every moment I spend giving you an overview of things that you have to remember regardless, is a moment utterly wasted.”

Caeden shifted uneasily. “But I already know so much more than I did an hour ago. What if I can’t remember at all? What if it takes too long and then you just have to tell me anyway?”

“I know that you are afraid of your memories, but do not let that fear dictate your actions,” growled Asar, a clear rebuke. “Give me a month. One month to try and sate your curiosity by restoring what you already know, rather than me trying to teach you. After that, if you still do not have everything you need? I will talk until my throat is raw and your ears bleed. I will impart every piece of knowledge I possibly can.” He leaned forward, gripping Caeden by the shoulder. “But Tal’kamar? If we get to that point, we have already failed. My words simply cannot replace your experiences. The truth is, I could talk for a hundred years and never bring you to where you need to be. So this *is* the only way forward.”

Caeden swallowed, chest taut, but nodded slowly.

“Then let’s begin,” he said quietly.

## Chapter 1

Davian spun smoothly past another slow-moving bolt of shimmering white Essence, not bothering to extinguish it this time.

He darted across the rain-slick courtyard toward his target, weaving nimbly between the bright slivers of energy inching across the open space, all the while focusing on the spherical mesh of dark, hardened kan from which the attacks were emanating. He gritted his teeth, blinking away the occasional droplet of rain that made its way into his eyes, continuing to force back the flow of time as he moved. Everything was much harder this far from Deilannis. It was less than a minute since he’d begun, but already he was nearing his capacity to keep this up.

He stepped to the side as more bars of molten light appeared; he diverted some of his focus and snatched a few of them from the air nearby with kan, redirecting them back at their source. They hit the spinning sphere and simply dissipated.

He grunted, not bothering to look around as the first of the bolts he’d ignored finally smashed into the tall stone archway behind him, accompanied by the muted roar of crumbling masonry as it began to collapse.

The Elders were *not* going to like that.

Brightening at the thought, he dodged between the two kan barriers in his path—similar in construction to the sphere ahead, but entirely static—and skidded to his knees as another stream of light, this one far stronger than anything he’d seen thus far, sliced through the air where his head had been a few seconds earlier.

His eyes widened a little. That was new.

Dangerous, too.

He growled, forcing himself up again and finally reaching the outer edge of the swirling sphere. He breathed deeply, the sharp cold of the winter's morning in his lungs helping him focus, clearing his head. He could do this. The barrier wasn't perfect—the hardened mesh confronting him was just a shell protecting active, malleable kan underneath, and he could occasionally spot the more vulnerable lines of dark energy writhing through the gaps.

The problem was that the mesh was constantly revolving. Even slowed though it was to his perception, the protective shell still moved too fast for him to accurately thread his own kan through it. And the moment any of his attacks touched the hardened, spinning outer layer, they dissipated like smoke in the wind.

Stepping into motion again he prowled the edge of the barrier, every nerve taut as Essence attacks flashed out at him, slowed but still requiring quick reactions at this range. In between the strikes he arrowed dark energy experimentally into the gaps of the sphere, probing for weaknesses. Each time, his threads were cut by the mesh before they could impact what was inside. He tried forcing the kan through faster, but to no avail. He tried matching his threads to the rotation; the shell somehow sensed what he was doing and jerked in response, changing direction, shifting savagely and unpredictably in order to slice through his attack.

He growled again, for a moment considering trying hardened kan of his own—but the memory of his last such attempt held him back. A kan blade would more easily disrupt the softer internal workings of the shield, but there was one firm rule when two constructs of hardened kan clashed: whichever was created first was stronger. Even if he succeeded in damaging what lay within, it wouldn't be fast enough to stop the mesh from rotating into his own attack.

And the last time he'd been manipulating hardened kan when it had been broken, he'd ended up bedridden for an entire day combating the resulting headache.

Davian's sense of urgency mounted as a faster-moving bar of Essence grazed his shoulder, and he felt time start to push against him again. He squinted. A portion of the sphere seemed to be only shell, with no active kan strands behind it at all. Was that right? Easier to maintain, he supposed, but flawed. Dependent on illu-

sion for security. Hardened kan couldn't stop him from physically moving through it. And if he could place himself inside it without being hit by any of the active kan strands, the rest would be easy.

He waited three more full rotations of the mesh, batting away flashes of Essence, until the gap he'd spotted came toward him again.

He dove forward.

The world lurched as the active strands—rotating with the shell, hidden neatly between two close-set layers of hardened kan—caught him. He was ripped violently back into time, dropping to one knee and groaning, head spinning. His limbs felt weak and he swallowed, barely avoiding dry-retching. Behind him, he could hear the last pieces of the shattered archway still smashing to the ground.

When he'd recovered enough to look up, Ishelle's amused grin greeted him.

"You really thought you could just *walk* through it?"

Davian grunted. "I thought there was a gap," he coughed, rising unsteadily to his feet, quickly supported by Ishelle as he stumbled. "That was dirty."

Ishelle's smile widened as she gestured with her free hand, dismissing the barrier that had been whirling around her. "Because my shield actually did what it was supposed to do? Or because I outsmarted you?"

"Dirty," repeated Davian firmly, though he gave her a smile as he rubbed his head. He sighed, then politely disengaged himself from Ishelle's grasp, glancing around at the cloud of dust where the archway into the courtyard had once been. "And... hmm."

"Hmm," agreed Ishelle, giving him a stern look.

"That's not *my* fault," protested Davian. "There was no way I could have absorbed all of those bolts *and* kept myself outside of time."

"That was the point." Ishelle peered at him. "You need to be less competitive."

Davian snorted. "We won't mention that one blast that nearly took my head off, then." He sighed. "I still have no idea how to beat that shield of yours. You say you can maintain it while you're asleep, now, too? If mine was half as effective, I'd be ecstatic."

"A few years of constant nagging from Driscin helps get it